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SUBJECT: LEBANON: CODEL PELOSI MEETS WITH PM SINIORA

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Christopher W. Murray. Reason: Section 1.4 (b).

11. (U) April 2, 2007 meeting in Beirut between CODEL Pelosi and Prime Minister Siniora.

Lebanese Attendees:

Prime Minister Fouad Siniora

Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Elias Murr

Ambassador Mohamed Chatah, Senior Advisor to the Prime Minister

Ambassador Antoine Chedid, Lebanon's Ambassador Designate to the U.S.

Roula Nouraddine, Advisor to the Prime Minister (Notetaker)

U.S. Attendees:

Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi

Representative Tom Lantos (D-CA)

Representative Henry Waxman (D-CA)

Representative Nick Rahall (D-WV)

Representative David Hobson (R-OH)

Representative Louise Slaughter (D-NY)

Representative Keith Ellison (D-MN)

Charge d'Affaires Christopher W. Murray, U.S. Embassy Beirut

Edward Messmer, U.S. Embassy Beirut (Notetaker)

SUMMARY

12. (C) PM Siniora told CODEL Pelosi that Lebanon and the region were at a critical crossroads where the continued support of the U.S. and the international community were necessary to introduce democracy and freedom. He warned the Speaker that Syrian President Bashar al-Asad would use her visit to Damascus to create the illusion that the international community is once more accepting Syria. Siniora urged the Speaker to be clear in her discussions with Asad that the only way to return to the community of nations was to accept the Special Tribunal and acknowledge the sovereignty of Lebanon. Concerning UNSCR 1701, PM Siniora admitted that the Lebanese-Syrian border was a serious problem and had produced a Lebanon that was "awash" in weapons. He also maintained, however, that due to his reinforcement of the border with an additional 8,600 LAF troops and unspecified assistance from the German government, the frontier was steadily becoming more secure. Siniora asked the U.S. to pursue a comprehensive regional peace agreement, not only to assure peace for both Israel and the Arab states, but also to strengthen moderate Islam at the expense of extremists who were causing so much of the violence in the region. End summary.

13. (C) Prime Minister Siniora and his advisors received Speaker Pelosi and her colleagues in an April 2 meeting at the PM's offices in the Grand Serail in Beirut. Siniora had meetings with German Chancellor Angela Merkel both before and after his meeting with Speaker Pelosi. The Prime Minister, the Speaker, and the Chancellor had a brief private discussion as the delegations crossed paths in Siniora's offices. Speaker Pelosi and Chancellor Merkel agreed to urge all Western legislative bodies to put pressure on Speaker Nabih Berri to allow Lebanon's parliament to convene.

MUTUAL INTERESTS

14. (C) PM Siniora said he hoped that the CODEL's visit would give them a strong understanding of the forces that were at work in Lebanon and the region. Siniora stated that he wanted to explain his strategy in dealing with Hizballah and its political overlords, Syria and Iran. The Prime Minister argued that the survival of a free and independent Lebanon, with its tradition of tolerance and diversity, was critical for the region, and he conveyed his sincere hope that already generous U.S. support would continue until Lebanon was able to stand on its own.

15. (C) Speaker Pelosi expressed her appreciation for the opportunity to see first-hand the developments that began with the Cedar Revolution in spring 2005. The Speaker assured the Prime Minister that U.S. support for a democratic Lebanon was firm and enjoyed bi-partisan support in Congress. Speaker Pelosi briefly reviewed the considerable contributions made to America by Lebanese immigrants and said that this heritage forged close bonds between the U.S. and Lebanon. She also commended the Prime Minister for his stalwart and courageous leadership of Lebanon's pro-reform

BEIRUT 00000483 002 OF 004

forces and said he had many admirers in the U.S. and the international community.

CRITICAL JUNCTURE

16. (C) PM Siniora reported that Lebanon and the region as a whole were passing through the most important period in the last fifty years. The powerful forces of Islamic extremists, encouraged by the selfish ambitions of Iran and Iraq, were close to overturning the entire region. If successful, their efforts would result in catastrophic sectarian conflict. The political and religious moderates of the region were under severe pressure. Without international assistance and real movement in the key issue of Arab-Israeli relations, the moderates could fail, at considerable cost to regional and global stability.

17. (C) Siniora explained that the 29-year reign of Syrian control over Lebanon had produced a severely weakened state, a nearly bankrupt treasury, and most seriously, had deeply corroded Lebanon's tradition of sectarian peace and tolerance. Add to this difficult legacy the consequences of civil conflict and military actions by external forces and the result was a vulnerable nation buffeted by forces it could not face alone. However, due to the strength of the Lebanese people, as demonstrated by the events of spring 2005, and the critical support of the international community, Lebanon has begun to emerge from its troubled past.

18. (C) Unfortunately, Siniora explained, Lebanon now has to face the combined interference of both Syria and Iran, exercised through its proxy Hizballah. The reasons were relatively simple: Syria desired to regain control over its former ward, and Iran wanted to extend its reach to the Mediterranean -- and the borders of Israel. Lebanon was paying a price for its geography. It has to find a way to neutralize the external forces bent on destroying it as a sovereign state.

SPECIAL TRIBUNAL AND SOVEREIGNTY

¶9. (C) Siniora strongly urged the Speaker and the U.S. to support rapid establishment of the Special Tribunal. Not only would an empowered tribunal prosecute those responsible for the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, but it would also serve as a bulwark of Lebanon's independence. The tribunal, protected by the international community, would be curtail Syria's ambitions toward its weaker neighbor. Only with the shield provided by the court and its sponsorship by the UN Security Council could Lebanon obtain the political space needed to reach full sovereignty and democracy.

¶10. (C) The Prime Minister stressed that the most dangerous problem facing Lebanon was the external threat imposed by Syria and Iran. Syria, principally through Hizballah but also by using other pro-Syrian proxies, has destabilized Lebanon through political violence that threatens its still-fragile democracy. Siniora said Syria has been behind more than 30 assassination attempts against pro-reform forces over the past three years, and has cared little about international opinion. He maintained that Syria's plan was blunt and focused: destabilize Lebanon through political violence, and prevent its government from functioning. Speaker Pelosi affirmed her resolve to confront aggressively Syrian officials with their record of support for terrorism.

A SHACKLED PARLIAMENT

¶11. (C) PM Siniora urged the Speaker to put pressure on her Lebanese counterpart, pro-Syrian Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri, to re-convene the Parliament. The Parliament must act, in order for the country's democratic majority to move the country forward in reconstruction and reform. Siniora said it was ironic that Berri has tried to use the argument that the Siniora government is "illegitimate" when in fact, it was Berri who was blatantly violating Lebanon's constitution by single-handedly preventing its legislature to function.

¶12. (C) Siniora argued that Speaker Berri's obstructionism and Hizballah's intimidating presence in the streets of Beirut were all part and parcel of a Syrian plan to destabilize, destroy, and finally, re-exert control over

BEIRUT 00000483 003 OF 004

Lebanon. Siniora implied that Berri could be influenced by fellow legislators to do the right thing. But even if that were not possible, at least he would be embarrassed by his illegal denial of Parliament's right to meet. Speaker Pelosi assured the Prime Minister that both she and Representative Slaughter (whose experience on the U.S. House Rules Committee would be used to explain the democratic legislative process) would weigh in on the matter when they met with Berri later in the day.

UNSCR 1701 AND BORDER SECURITY

¶13. (C) When asked directly about Lebanon's incomplete compliance with the provisions of UNSCR 1701, PM Siniora admitted that securing his country's 470-kilometer border, particularly along the Syrian frontier, was beyond the current capability of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF). He did, however, argue that the LAF, with support from a greatly strengthened UNIFIL force, was presently patrolling the country's southern border with Israel. And along the northern border, the LAF and Lebanon's Internal Security Forces were about to implement an integrated border security project, with assistance from Germany's Federal Border Police.

¶14. (C) But as for securing the remainder of Lebanon's

porous frontier, Siniora acknowledged that this was still a work in progress. Without going into deployment details or overall effectiveness, he did state that he has ordered an additional 8,600 LAF troops to the border region to tighten control and demonstrate that his government was taking the problem seriously. Similarly, he argued for sustained international security assistance, in addition to that which has already been delivered. Siniora insisted that if he could transform the LAF into a highly capable force, two important objectives could be achieved. First, in accordance with 1701, he could assure the Security Council that Lebanon was meeting its border obligations. But more importantly, his government could confidently assert to Hizballah that the protection of the "resistance" was no longer required or desired.

¶15. (C) It was clear that Siniora felt that strengthened border controls were of critical importance, because, in his view, not only would it lead to a peaceful disarming of the terrorist organization, but at the same time, it would deprive Syria and Iran of a key lever of control inside his country. Speaker Pelosi conveyed support to the Prime Minister in this effort and said that Congress would view such assistance requests with the utmost seriousness.

ADVICE FOR SPEAKING WITH AL-ASAD

¶16. (C) Addressing the delegation's visit to Syria, PM Siniora urged the Speaker to exercise extreme caution in dealing with Syrian President Bashar al-Asad. "It is not for nothing that they are known as the best merchants in the bazaar," remarked Siniora. He warned the Speaker that Asad could be expected to use her visit to create dissension in the international community and paint the Speaker's visit as part of Syria's "accepted return" to the community of nations. Siniora said talks with the Syrian President were possible, but one had to make "absolutely clear" the international demand that Syria cease its destructive interference in neighboring countries, and in Lebanon's case, accept the Special Tribunal.

¶17. (C) Siniora's senior advisor, Ambassador Chatah, interjected that although the Syrian regime was primarily interested in its own survival, it also placed great importance on the recovery of the long-lost Golan Heights. At present, Chatah said, Syria believes it enhances its chances to recover the Golan by "bullying" Lebanon. Chatah suggested that the Speaker make clear to Asad that Syria's violent interference in Lebanon in fact has the opposite effect: it makes Syrian recovery of the Golan ever more distant.

¶18. (C) Siniora cautioned against making any statements to the Syrian regime that could be even remotely interpreted as acquiescence to irresponsible Syrian behavior. The Prime Minister warned that any talk about a "deal" that would give Syria even a trace of control in Lebanon would in effect lead inexorably to reassertion of complete Syrian control. Siniora concluded that Syria simply does not understand

BEIRUT 00000483 004 OF 004

mutual respect for other nations, unless this principle is laid out in the starkest terms and with serious consequences for unacceptable behavior.

¶19. (C) In closing, PM Siniora declared that his government and its pro-reform allies are trying to undo years of political oppression and conflict and create a nation that embraces all segments of Lebanese society. He stated that Lebanon wants to establish "good relations" with Syria, and following a successful regional peace plan, relations with Israel. But at this critical phase, he urged the U.S. to support Lebanon's fragile democracy with all its power and influence. Not only would a successful outcome create a

stable, democratic, and prosperous Lebanon, but Siniora assured his guests that the region and the U.S. would also accrue substantial and long-lasting benefits.

¶20. (C) Members of the CODEL raised with Siniora their concern about the fate of the two Israeli soldiers kidnapped by Hizballah on July 12 of 2006. Siniora acknowledged the validity of their interest, and regretted that he knew nothing whatsoever of the soldiers' status.

¶21. (U) CODEL Pelosi departed post before clearing this message.
MURRAY